

Forever young? Prevalence and correlates of feeling old

Counting the number of birthdays a person has experienced from birth until a certain point in time i.e. chronological age, is a crude measure of ageing. Individuals with the same chronological age and health, may have different perceptions of ageing. We use a unique dataset, representative of the Italian population aged 65-74, to explore the factors associated with the perception of feeling old.

Key Points

- Age identity accounts for factors beyond chronological age.
- Age-related social categories that exist in society and age-symbolic events may serve as signals for a person's perception of ageing.
- We show evidence that nowadays most people below age 75 do not feel old.
- Policies should create the conditions for an active ageing, but also favour a cultural change that helps people not to feel old.
- The concept of ageing is not independent of time and place and it should account for improvements in health and life expectancy that have influenced how people age.

Introduction

Chronological age is usually employed as a measure of individual and population ageing, with the threshold for “being old” set at 60 or 65 years. However, counting the number of birthdays a person has experienced from birth until a certain

point in time i.e. chronological age, is a crude measure of ageing which ignores the subjective dimension of ageing. How old individuals feel is an important measure of ageing, yet, limited evidence exists on the factors associated with feeling old.

The study

What factors are associated with the perception of feeling old? To investigate, this study uses a unique dataset, representative of the Italian population aged 65-74. We focus on this age range because it has been shown to be a “turning point” after which people tend to perceive themselves to be, and wish to be, younger than their chronological age. The data were collected in 2013 as part of the project “Non mi ritiro”: l’allungamento della vita, una sfida per le generazioni, un’opportunità per la società [“I don’t want to be inactive”: the lengthening of life, a challenge for generations, an opportunity for the society], funded by the Catholic University of Milan.

The data include information about the reasons people feel old as well as what they associate with feeling old. We look at differences between men and women, as well as by level of education.

Main findings

When do people feel old?

We find that, on average, women are more likely than men to feel old and to think that society considers them to be old. Figure 1 summarises, by gender, the reasons for which respondents have felt old. Among those who have ever felt old, men are more likely (45.5%) than women (19.8%) to report that retirement made them feel old. However, this may be because fewer women in these age groups carried out paid work during their lifecourse. The main reason for feeling old among women is when physical independence declines (43.9 vs 31.6% among men). Widowhood is a more common cause of feeling old for women than men, with 11.1% of female participants citing this as a cause, as opposed to just 2.7% of men. Turning 65 and becoming a grandparent contributes to both men and women feeling old, with similar percentages reported for both genders.

Educational differences in when people feel old

We compared three educational groups (low, middle, and high levels of educational attainment) to identify any variations in when people felt old. Among all groups, nearly half of respondents reported that they have never felt old. Among the 50% who said they have felt old, Figure

2 summarises the reasons. All three sub-groups report retirement and decline in physical independence as the two main reasons for having felt old. However, the only statistically significant differences between the groups are that low educated groups are less likely to cite retirement, and more likely to cite widowhood, as a reason for feeling old, compared to the medium educated group.

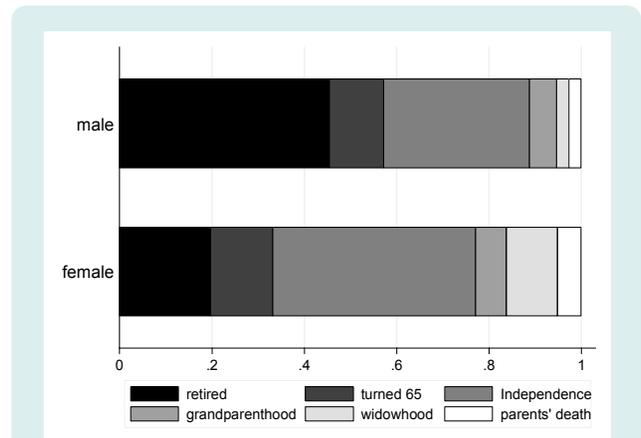


Figure 1: Distribution (percentage) of answers to the question “When did you feel old?” by gender.

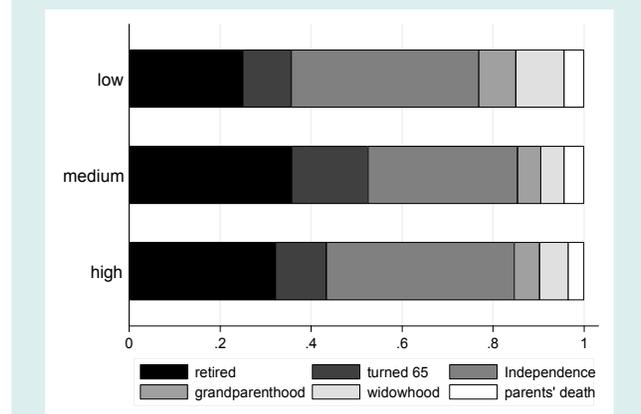


Figure 2: Distribution (percentage) of answers to the question “When did you feel old?” by educational attainment.

What makes a person feel old?

In order to better understand what kind of experiences or factors people associate with ageing, we make use of a more general question: “What most makes a person feel old”. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the answers for men and women (note each respondent could mention up to three reasons). Although both men and women report loneliness and decrease in physical health status most often as reasons to feel old, the

percentage of women citing loneliness (60.5%) is significantly higher than that of men (54.7%). It is interesting that among both men and women, only about 10% mention decrease in social relationships as a reason for feeling old.

For men, retirement and boredom are more likely to be associated with feeling old than for women. However, women report the death of loved ones more often than their male counterparts.

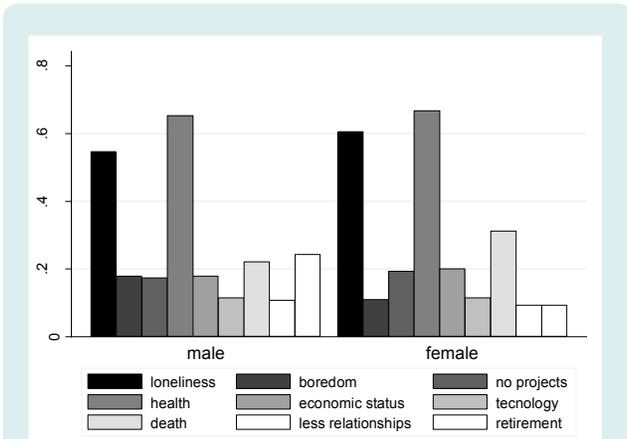


Figure 3: Distribution (percentage) of answers to the question “What most makes a person feel old?” by gender.

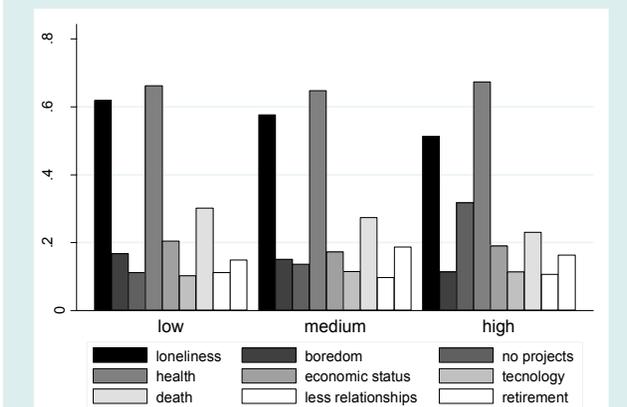


Figure 4: Distribution (percentage) of answers to the question “What most makes a person feel old?” by educational attainment.

Educational differences in what makes a person feel old

Lower, middle, and higher educated groups all similarly report loneliness and decrease in physical health as reasons to feeling old (Figure 4). However, the likelihood of reporting loneliness as a main reason for feeling old decreases as education increases. Statistical tests highlight a significantly higher proportion of low educated respondents mentioning boredom as compared

to their tertiary educated counterparts; while the absence of projects is more likely associated with feeling old among the highest educated.

Policy implications

Defining ageing is not easy, given its multidimensional nature linked to health, physical functioning, demographic characteristics, socio-economic status and cultural perspectives. Negative stereotypes are often associated with the image of an older person. However, together with a change in older peoples own perception, the concept of ageing also needs to change in wider society. Ageing cannot be considered independent of context and Governments should promote active and successful ageing among older people, but also raise awareness among younger generations in order to develop positive images of ageing. Indeed, one of the strategies of the active ageing framework focuses on changing attitudes and developing a positive approach to face the challenges of ageing.

Today, ageing is not the same process undergone by previous generations. Our research shows that most people below 75 do not feel old. Longevity, healthy ageing, and technological innovation have shaped this generation of older people to enable them to be able to continue to actively contribute to both society and family. Yet, “feeling old” is in antithesis with active ageing. Only when society and family become more age-friendly and further facilitate the contribution of older people does retirement become the beginning of a new period of development for the individual. In light of this, it is important to take into account the opinion of older people about the own ageing process. Policies that offer opportunities for active participation in society may reduce the perception of being inactive and feeling old. This may, also, reduce gender and education differences in the quality of ageing. Activities that bring together different generations may not only increase participation of older people but also reduce ageism and negative perceptions about the ageing process among younger generations.

In order to promote active ageing, policies should not only encourage social activities, but also promote a cultural change. The ageing population should be helped to be active, but also to not feel old.

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